

Coalition of Innovating Congregations

A quarterly newsletter

Powerful Learning: Design Principles in Action

5770 May 2010 • Volume 1, Issue 5

The Coalition of Innovating Congregations Creating Powerful Learning

What is Powerful Learning? It is learning that nurtures a child's Jewish journey. Powerful learning enables a child to apply Torah to daily life, explore a rich spiritual life, mend the world and belong to the Jewish people. Powerful Learning prepares a child for a meaningful and purposeful Jewish life, not a pen and pencil test. Powerful learning reaps measurable results.

To get those results, Coalition Educators are applying **four design principles** that have been identified as essential by the Lippman Kanfer Institute's *Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century*.

The Design Principles create learning that:

- Fosters caring, purposeful relationships because, "to fulfill the purposes of Jewish education...that draws on and nurtures the yearning for connectedness."
- Responds to the questions, challenges, and meaning of everyday life because "today's learners need guides to help them uncover the answers to everyday experiences."
- Enables meaning through inquiry, problem solving, and discovery, because "the involvement of learners in shaping their educational experiences will produce more authentic, powerful learning."
- Conveys rich content and is accessible because, "in order to make Jewish literacy vital for today's learners, we must provide them with experiences rich in Jewish content, presented in inviting and engaging ways."

The stories in this issue provide a vivid picture of powerful learning. LOMED for the 21st century is learning that moves to life.

North Shore Synagogue:

CREATING LEARNING ANCHORED IN CARING PURPOSEFUL RELATIONSHIPS

A beach ball flies in the air. "Aleph. Dalet. Zayin." The children call out the letter they catch. This is not Hebrew learning of yesterday. Hebrew is not a subject that children need to learn for some special occasion. Rather, in Jacqui Golub's first grade class at North Shore Synagogue, Hebrew is the joyful language that connects learners to one another and to the Jewish people. K-2 children and their parents sing, dance, move, draw and celebrate with Hebrew as part of the J.ELLO (Jewish Educational Living and Learning Opportunities) program. Hebrew is a key to joy and kinship.

The playful and varied way in which Jacqui uses Hebrew is based on Jewish identity research. According to sociologist, Steven Cohen, there are three B's of Jewish identity building: belonging, behaving, and believing. While all three are important, Jacqui's focus this year is on belonging. For a child to belong to the Jewish people, caring relationships are essential. Relationships happen serendipitously, but Jacqui isn't settling for serendipity. Steven Cohen told educators at the Vermont CAJE conference in 2008 that one of the best things they could do as Jewish educators was get children to play in Jewish soccer leagues. Jewish friendships really matter when trying to build Jewish identity.

So Jacqui has these young children laugh and play while they learn with each other. After the Hebrew ball tossing, Jacqui introduces a new Hebrew letter and asks students to work in pairs on the material in their workbook. She gives students careful directions about helping and listening to one another. Hebrew words like *chaver* (friend) and *kehillah* (community) define what students are encouraged to experience.

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North Shore Synagogue (continued)

“Getting to know each other’s names in October is not building community, instructs Educational Resource Provider, Debbie Krivoy of Avoda Arts. Too often teachers do a “get to know you” exercise at the beginning of the year, and then check off community building from their to-do list. Krivoy has worked with Jacqui and other teachers in J.ELLO to learn new and focused ways to continually use learning as a means of fostering collaboration, storytelling and shared experience. Nurturing caring relationships among students is a learner outcome that Jacqui focuses on in each lesson.

Relationships among the generations is also essential when building a vital community for children, so J.ELLO brings seniors and teens to learn with the children each week. Bubbies, Zaydies, and post-b’nai mitzvah students play a part in the learning. “I love reading stories to the children, said one Bubbie, a senior volunteer from the congregation, “Their eyes light up and it makes me happy.” The classroom becomes more like a family gathering with people of all ages. “It seems a bit like a Passover seder. The students feel comfortable with me,” said a teen assistant, “and it gives me chance to help out.”

The Hebrew letters and words the children learn are put to good use when they celebrate Shabbat each week with their parents, Bubbies, Zaydies and teen assistants. “The children,” says Jacqui, “really like seeing their Bubbie, Zaydies, and teens outside of the classroom.” Jacqui sees the affect these caring relationships have on the children. “My students are not anonymous little people at this synagogue. Congregants of different generations know the children by name. They celebrate and learn weekly with them,” Jacqui says with pride. “I think my students are really happy to be here.”

The children sit with their parents, friends, Bubbies, Zaydies, teen assistants and teachers to sing *Hinei Mah Tov* and there are lots of smiles. Hebrew learning is joyful. They will soon learn that Hebrew has many words for joy. *Simcha*, *sason*, *gila*, and *rina* to name a few. Jewish learning, joyful relationships and Jewish identity are the foundation upon which Jacqui builds her learning.

Powerful Learning Affects Living Our Tradition Teaches “Study Leads to Action”

Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of *Nitza* in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.

(Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b)

Fill your time to whatever extent you can by learning about things that are divine, not simply to know them but also to do them; and when you shut your book, observe around you, see within you, to know if by your hand you can make it into a deed, something that has been learned.

(Moses of Evreux, French Tosafist)

Temple Shaaray Tefila of Bedford Corners

DEVELOPING LEARNING THAT IS CONTENT RICH AND ACCESSIBLE



Asking Generative Questions

*Shaaray Tefila Kitah Gimel Learners
Connect Torah To Their Lives*

In Hebrew, the word for “journey” is *masa*. Julia Parzen, a third grade teacher at Shaaray Tefila of Bedford Corners is creating powerful educational experiences. Her goal is to help students on their Jewish journeys. To be on a Jewish journey means to always question. To be on Jewish journey means to turn to sacred text for insights on how to live in relationship with God and with the Jewish people. To help her learners on their *masa*, Julia shapes her lesson around Bible stories. Questioning and contemplation are the habits of mind and heart which she is helping the children develop.

How is this personal engagement facilitated? Before students begin to read the Bible story independently, Julia writes questions on the board: “What is interesting about this story? What does this story make you wonder? Find a place where this story reminds you of another Torah story we have already read.” Julia Parzen uses these open-ended questions to facilitate meaning-making for her learners. Her approach fosters higher-order thinking quite different from a teacher “covering the facts of the story.” Learners engage in relevant conversations about their lives based on the text, rather than memorizing the facts and plotline of the story.

Park Avenue Synagogue

ENCOURAGING LEARNERS TO SEEK THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND MEANING OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

In Manhattan, children find themselves surrounded by buildings and sidewalks, supermarkets and fruit stands. It is easy to forget the farms and orchards, the factories and packaging plants, which brought the food to them. It is easy not to see the hands of men, women, and God that are part of the creation of the food children eat. *Brachot* act like special eyeglasses to bring into view what is not readily apparent. *Brachot* help children live with gratitude.

At Park Avenue Synagogue, Rina Moscovitz noticed that her Bet students always arrive tired and hungry after a full day of school. Providing a snack for them was easy. With the help of LOMED, Rina took the next step. She turned hurried snack time into an opportunity for real connection. Rina put to work the design principle her congregation was experimenting with this year: “Learning will seek the answers to the questions, challenges, and meaning of everyday life.”



Success: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

*Park Avenue Synagogue Kitah Bet Learners
Show the Steps for Bread-Making*

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Design Learning for a Jewish Journey:

- *Use Open Ended Questions* to allow space for learners to connect the big ideas of sacred text to their own lives.
- *Create a Safe and Accepting Environment* where learners can be comfortable expressing their personal opinions and sharing their experiences.
- *Make learning relevant* by connecting everyday experiences to Jewish texts, rituals, and ideas.
- *Encourage cooperative learning* so learners can grow and learn together, guiding each other on their Jewish journeys.
- *Experiment with diverse activities* which aid learners with different learning styles to find their way on their journey.

Temple Shaaray Tefila of Bedford Corners (Continued)

Julia guides her learners through the text as if it were a life map for a *masa*. “Identify your life questions and turn to Jewish text to uncover the answers.” The learners use post-it notes to mark the places in their book where they see answers to these questions. They jot down notes to help them remember their new ideas.

Julia thoughtfully creates an atmosphere that is safe and accepting. “Share your answers,” she encourages students. “What have you discovered?” The eight year olds are excited. They want to share their insights. Smiles and recognition encourage them to share.

Julia helps her third graders collect their insights in a “God journal.” She instructs her class to “interview a *haver* (friend) in class. What does your *haver* think about the Bible story we just read? What question did the story raise? How did the story make your *haver* feel?”

Children are learning how to be in relationship with sacred text and with one another. Instead of memorizing Bible facts, her learners find what speaks to them.

Julia creates powerful learning by applying a critical design principle, “learning will be content-rich and accessible.” She experiments with many techniques like acting out stories, creating a tableau of a critical Bible moment, and interviewing characters. All of these techniques enable learners to access the collective wisdom of our ancestors so it can guide for their life journeys.

Park Avenue Synagogue (Continued)

Now, students enter the classroom to find eleven beautiful posters depicting the steps in the bread-making process. “*Hamotzi*,” Rina teaches, “lets us see the seed, the grain, the kneading and Adonai Elohaynu.” Rina invited her students to choose one of the steps of the bread making to explore through collage. The children expressed their appreciation for each step of the bread making process. Over the next sessions, Rina asked her students a variety of questions about the *motzi*: “What do the words mean to you? What does *motzi* help you see? Describe a time when you said the *motzi*. In what ways does saying a blessing help you experience and express gratitude?” The students depicted their answers in elaborate collages. The artwork enabled students to reflect. Their learning connected *motzi* to their own personal experiences.

Rina extended her teaching about *brachot* to the blessing for apples. In her experimentation of putting the design principle in action, she asked learners to think about where they thought the apples originated. Once they generated the steps it takes to create an apple and bring it to their table, she again asked each one to choose a step that excited them. Then she had them create a prayer of appreciation of their own.

One learner exclaimed, “When I eat an apple today it reminds me of the kindergarten field trip to the apple orchard. It was so easy to pick apples and so much fun. Now when I eat an apple, I think of what God gave us.”

By using her design principle, Rina was able to add a dimension to her teaching practice that she had not previously explored. Always a creative teacher, she realized she may not have aligned the artistic experiences she provided for children with the creative discovery and reflection that she practiced this year. “Creative activity,” says Rina, “is an opportunity for children to explore the questions of their lives.” Rina has noticed that her students have increased their ability to express gratitude and now, when they look at their food, they see the hands of people and of God—for this, Rina says, she is grateful!



Living & Learning Experience: Cindy Reich, of the Experiment in Congregational Education, leads a protocol to reflect on assessment evidence, March 14, 2010.



Examining Powerful Learning

At the Living & Learning Experience on March 14th close to 100 teachers bring examples of powerful learning and assessment. From photos to artwork and journal entries, teachers were excited to show off their learners' work and celebrate the success of their colleagues.

*In order to provide privacy,
a number of the names in
the stories have been changed.*

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